10: Linton E-5 (1920-1921)1939
OX6 Marquesas OX6

Chapter V

MARQUESAN CULTURE

By Ralph Linton

131 THE Marquesans are a Polynesian people living on a series of islands in the central Pacific about ten degrees south of the equator. Physically they were, and are, an extremely fine
142 group. They resemble South Europeans, although they are somewhat flatter as to nose, fuller as to lips, and darker in color —about the shade a South European becomes after a summer on the bathing beach. The men average from five feet nine to five feet ten inches tall, with splendid muscular development; the women are outstandingly handsome even by European
164 standards. Because of their isolation, however, they have developed little resistance to disease and fall easy victims to the contagions introduced by the whites.

648 Although the Marquesans have been under French domina-
797 tion since 1842, they were among the last of the Polynesian groups to become Christianized. They drove out missionaries and resisted white influence as long as they could, but at the time of my visit in 1920–22, Marquesan was already a broken
[124] culture. It was possible however, to reconstruct the conditions of the old days from the accounts and reminiscences of old men still living in the islands.

168 When the Marquesans were finally forced to submit to white domination, they adopted the only means of dignified and effective resistance which was open to them; they ceased to breed. This was a perfectly deliberate measure, the people preferring extinction to subjection. I visited many villages populated entirely by persons of early middle age to old age with not a single

[p. 137] [pp. 1–136 not processed]

10: Linton E-5 (1920-1921)1939
OX6 Marquesas OX6

168 child in the group. On Tahuata, the island next to the one on which I was living, there were over two hundred deaths for every birth.

Environment and Economy

133 The Marquesas are a series of high islands, very rugged and 775 mountainous. At the Western end of Hiva Oa, a cliff, straight as the wall of a house, rises from the sea to a height of 2,000 feet. The natives believe this to be the place from which the spirits of the dead leap off to the bottom of the sea, whence they travel eastward to Hawaiki, the mythical land from which [793] all Polynesians came. At the top of this cliff lived a single priest whose duty it was to watch this leap and presumably say farewell to the ghost as he passed on to the next world. The priest [211] kept records of each death and birth by means of a long cord, tying a knot for each birth and untying a knot for each death, thus keeping a sort of informal census for the group.

133 The islands have no coastal shelf; the coast goes down with no barrier reef, making fishing difficult and dangerous. The interior of the islands is extremely rugged, consisting chiefly of sections of blown-up volcanic craters with peaks four to five thousand feet high. Many of the larger islands have never been traversed even today. The coast is made up of narrow valleys cut off from one another by ridges so high and steep that in many cases one can get from one valley to another only by sea. 137 There is considerable timber in the valleys and also on the slopes at the eastern ends of the islands. The uplands are covered by a growth of low ferns, across which one can see for many miles. There are a few ironwood trees, but most of the high country is open and waterless.

132 Since the islands are only ten degrees south of the equator, 731 the climate is warm, with little seasonal change. Being north of the trade winds and consequently devoid of seasonal rains, the islands are subjected from time to time to long and destructive droughts, which lead to serious crop failures and even to shortage of drinking water, as the streams go dry. This state